The Devil

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The Rise

The earth gave no warning. Only a hush fell over the forest — the sudden absence of birdsong, the wind drawing back into itself. Beneath layers of rock and clay, something old shifted, its body pressed in darkness, wrapped in roots that had forgotten they once fed on light. The soil above cracked in thin, uneven lines, and from within the narrow shaft emerged a figure that bore no scent, cast no heat, and was shaped by no womb. It clawed upward, slow and inevitable, not with hunger or urgency but with the mechanical certainty of rot. Its hands, long and wrong in proportion, left no prints in the black soil. Its face was neither young nor old, yet already wrong for this world — not a mask, not flesh, but a suggestion of both, stitched together by shadow. Eyes empty as burnt paper turned upward. The thing paused, listening. No sound came — not from beast nor wind nor the dead branches overhead. Something had silenced the forest, and what rose from the earth now carried that silence with it.

The pit behind him closed without a sound, swallowed by soil that shifted as if it had never known disturbance. He stepped onto the forest floor, bare feet sinking slightly into the wet rot of fallen leaves and worm-worked mulch. Branches draped low, heavy with moss and dripping beads of old rain. The fog moved toward him, not away, curling around his ankles like something grateful to be touched. He walked without urgency, shoulders slack, head tilted as if listening to something deep beneath the world. His body had no clear outline — the eyes would not agree on its shape. As he passed, tree bark greyed and curled, mushrooms shriveled, and insects drowned mid-flight in the still air. A breath left his throat, faint and long like a forgotten word, and the forest seemed to recoil — leaves stilling mid-rustle, branches no longer creaking. Above, a vulture wheeled once, then dropped without a cry, its wings folding before it struck the moss with a thud. There was no wound, no broken bone, only a dead thing in a silent wood, and a figure that left no mark behind.

He moved like mist in human form, the edges of his shape curling and shifting with each step. One moment he bore the stooped back and knotted hands of an old man with a sunken jaw, the next he was narrow and slight, a child no taller than a man's waist, barefoot and naked, with pale lashes and eyes that reflected no light. Each body flickered like a thought — never fully formed, never fully stable — as if flesh was a garment he wore carelessly, changed not for disguise but for ease. Between the trunks he glimpsed it: the faint glow of torchlight, soft and flickering, the color of warmth and sleep. The breeze moved toward it, and so did he. Branches parted as if afraid to brush him. He did not walk fast, yet the woods thinned behind him with each step. From ahead came the distant murmur of men in their dreams, pigs snuffling under wood-planked pens, a shutter slapping gently against a house. There was no intent in his stride, but something in the warmth

ahead called to him, not with voice, not with thought — just the quiet breathing of the living. The village lay still beneath the moon, and he was already among its trees.

No gate creaked. No latch turned. Yet he passed between homes as if the air itself had parted. The dogs, first to sense it, shrank under carts and whined low, pressing their bellies to the earth as if to vanish. One urinated and crawled into its kennel, teeth bared at nothing. Chickens stopped their rustling and stood stiff in the dark, heads twitching, beaks parted as if mid-cluck. Smoke rose thinly from a hearth, where a woman stirred broth with a slow, practiced rhythm. Her hand stopped. Not from sound, nor scent, but from a pressure on her spine — the sudden weight of breath she hadn't heard. Her eyes moved to the door, but nothing stirred there. Still, the skin on her neck prickled like she'd been touched by fingers made of cold breath. She turned and saw only her own shadow against the wall. Outside, the well creaked once, dry rope swinging without wind. Something was walking through the village, and no one had seen it arrive.

He stood beside the old stone well, its moss-grown rim slick with years of touched hands and drawn buckets. His shape was that of a man now, tall and thin, though the air around him rippled faintly, as if struggling to hold it in place. Laughter rang from the far side of the village, shrill and careless — children chasing each other through dusk, unaware that something in their world had tilted. He did not turn toward the sound. Instead, he leaned slowly over the well and extended one hand. It did not cast reflection. His fingers touched the surface, but did not break it; instead, they sank inward like breath against glass, dissolving into thin strands of grey that vanished on contact. The water shivered once, soundless. Then all movement ceased. What had been clear now darkened — not with ink or mud, but with something nameless, as if the memory of purity had been sucked out and replaced by silence. He stepped back, leaving no footprint on the mud. Behind him, the ropes groaned though no bucket descended. Something now lived in the well that had not been there before.

The sun rose grey and slow, casting a dim, colorless light over thatch roofs beaded with dew that would not lift. Smoke drifted weakly from a few chimneys, but the scent of morning bread was absent. The village, still hushed, stirred in parts, not with the warmth of waking but with an unease that crept boneward before the first word was spoken. Chickens lay scattered near coops, stiff and wrong, necks twisted without violence, feathers damp though it had not rained. A pig stood in its pen, eyes blank and staring, unmoving even when the slats were shaken. In the baker's cottage, the boy had been vomiting since the darkest hour before dawn. His skin was grey-blue, lips blackened and crusted. The father tried to hold him upright, but the child convulsed and spat up a ribbon of thick water darker than ink, stinking like spoiled marrow. His mouth would not close afterward. The mother wept silently with her forehead against the doorpost, rocking on her feet, whispering prayers that had no saints left in them.

Word passed quickly, carried in half-sentences by pale men who no longer knocked before entering. Some said the well was poisoned. Others said the moon had been too bright last night — that it had changed shape and looked down with a second, smaller face. Old Merta, who'd lived through two bad winters and never left her stool by the window, muttered that it was a punishment for something no one remembered. Before the sun had cleared the line of trees, a horse was already riding out for the priest.

At the far end of the village, just as the forge's coals were stirred to life, a man arrived. He wore the face of exhaustion: skin tight over high bones, cheeks hollow, eyes sunken like those of someone pulled from drowning. His clothes were neither torn nor fine — dull brown, dust-smudged, the sort worn by men who move from place to place but leave no story behind. A satchel hung limp at his side, but it carried no tools, no weapons, no marks. He smiled faintly at the innkeeper without showing teeth. His voice was soft, cracked by road dust. He asked for shelter for a night or two, perhaps some broth if there was any to spare. He said he was passing through, heading toward Bruges, or maybe Ghent — he couldn't quite recall.

The innkeeper, a thick man with scabbed knuckles and a burnt lip, looked him up and down. He did not speak at first. His eyes narrowed, not in suspicion, but in confusion, as if something in him had skipped a breath. Then, as if a rope had slackened inside his chest, he nodded and stepped aside. The stranger ducked under the low lintel and entered, his head just brushing the top beam, though he had not seemed so tall from outside. He took the stool near the hearth but made no move to warm his hands. The fire, though stoked, hissed low. The room felt colder, somehow.

Outside, bells were ringing for the dead pig they had decided not to butcher. A child screamed once in a distant cottage and fell silent. The stranger did not eat, though a bowl was brought to him. He only sat, hands folded, eyes closed — as if listening for something that had not yet spoken.

By midday, the priest came down the road with the hem of his robe caked in mud, shoulders hunched against the damp chill that clung to the land like a fever that would not break. His horse was borrowed and thin, and the man who rode it looked scarcely better — Father Renaud, lean-faced and red-eyed from sleeplessness, already whispered about in nearby parishes for his persistent cough and sermons that drifted toward dread without meaning to. His arrival brought no comfort. No children ran to greet him, no widow offered bread, no one bowed their head. The villagers stood in their doorways, watching him dismount in silence, as if uncertain whether to feel relief or shame. Renaud avoided their eyes.

The chapel was a squat thing of fieldstone and warped beams, its altar crude and darkened by years of breath and smoke. Inside, the light through the narrow windowpanes fell in bent angles, dust thick as wool. The priest mounted the pulpit just before sunset, and the villagers filed in behind him, the sick carried or supported, the healthy leaning forward as if

trying to find a reason to remain so. Renaud began his sermon with the sign of the cross, but already his voice trembled.

He spoke of suffering, of trials sent by God, of the need for humility before the mystery of divine will. Yet each phrase came too slow, each sentence stammered as if met with resistance mid-breath. At times he paused not for emphasis but for balance, gripping the edge of the lectern as though something had shifted underfoot. His eyes flicked to corners of the chapel where no one stood. His throat grew dry. A bead of sweat traced the line of his jaw despite the cold.

Then evening came. The sermon ended without benediction. The villagers left quickly, heads bowed, mumbling thanks not to the priest but to themselves, eager to reach their thresholds before the dark settled full. Father Renaud remained inside, alone, save for the candles burning down on the altar. He did not kneel to pray. He sat on the front pew with his head bowed, hands clasped loosely, as if waiting for a voice he had not yet heard.

It came, though no sound accompanied it. The door did not open. The air did not move. But something entered the chapel — a change, a presence, a shape with no sound and no outline. Renaud did not see it. But as he rose at last and turned to face the altar, his steps slowed. His lips moved to begin the vesper, but the words escaped him. A shudder passed through his hands. He stared forward, eyes wide, then slowly lifted his gaze to the rafters.

Behind him, though no shadow moved, something watched. Something stood where no footsteps had fallen. The candles flickered. The priest's voice cracked. "In nomine—" he began, and stopped. The words were gone, not stolen, but erased. His mouth opened and closed like that of a man who had forgotten what language was. His hands trembled at his sides.

He turned his head slightly — not because he heard anything, but because something inside him screamed. And there behind him, though he would never be able to describe it, something leaned close enough for its breath to pass through his skin. It said nothing. Yet when he stumbled from the chapel moments later, his face had aged, his knees buckled, and his eyes would no longer meet the crucifix hung above the altar.

That night, sleep did not come easily to Father Renaud, and when it did, it came too quickly, like a door closing behind him without sound. The bed in the rectory, narrow and bowed at the center, seemed to rock gently, as if the stone beneath it had softened. His breath grew shallow. Somewhere distant, bells tolled though none had been rung. Then the dark grew thicker than night should allow, and in that place his dreams began.

He stood in his childhood home — not as it was, but as his mind half-remembered it: walls shifting between wood and stone, a fire that flickered in the hearth without casting heat. His brother sat at the table, sharpening a knife slowly, eyes raised but hollow, mouth smiling though the teeth did not part. He spoke, but the voice was not his. "You've forgotten

something, Renaud," it said. "But I can help you remember." The priest's feet would not move. He tried to speak, but his tongue pressed like wet cloth against his teeth.

Then the dream changed. He stood in the garden, his mother kneeling in the soil, hands muddy up to the wrists, face streaked with ash. She looked up at him and asked where her other son had gone. Her voice broke on the last word. "Where is he?" she asked again, and the priest wept in silence though he did not know why. Behind her, a figure walked the edge of the hedge — his own form, but younger, with cleaner robes, fuller cheeks, and darker hair. That version of himself smiled without warmth. It leaned down and whispered into his mother's ear, and she screamed. The boy turned and looked at him. "You did nothing," he said, and turned his back.

Renaud awoke with the bedsheets twisted around his ankles, sweat dried in streaks down his chest, his mouth open in a silent gasp. He did not remember the words spoken to him in the dream. Not clearly. Only that they were close. Too close. They had pressed against his ear like breath on the skin. He felt them in his lungs, in the weight of his spine. The dreams left no pictures behind, only the heaviness of guilt, black and formless.

By morning, he had confessed three times — aloud, alone — to things he had never done. To theft, to lust, to betrayal. He did not believe them, not entirely, but they clung to his voice as he spoke, as though he were only naming what others had already seen in him. When he entered the chapel, he moved slowly, glancing over his shoulder despite the silence. He stepped into the confessional not to listen but to speak, and in the shadows of the narrow wooden box, he spoke not to the carved Christ above but to something that did not breathe and did not blink.

"My soul is not clean," he said, and waited.

No voice replied. But still he spoke again.

"I know you see me. I know I have failed."

A pause. Then again, more softly:

"I'm ready."

The hush within the confessional deepened. The air turned dense, heavy with stillness. Renaud lowered his head. And though he heard no reply, something inside him settled as if accepted. He stepped out into the nave slowly, with the quiet composure of a man who believes he has spoken to God — unaware that something else had listened, and had not disagreed.

The priest did not leave his chamber the next night. Candles burned down to stubs before he extinguished them, and even then he sat long after in the dark, clutching his rosary so tightly the beads left bruises in his palm. But the chapel remained quiet. The air in its rafters

no longer watched him, and the silence, though thick, was empty. Whatever had pressed against him — that still breath, that unseen presence — had passed. Not gone. Moved on.

In a cottage near the edge of the village, a child lay soaked in his sweat. His limbs had stiffened at dusk, and his mother had ceased singing to him by midnight. She knelt beside the pallet with her forehead to the floor, lips cracked, whispering prayers so low they no longer shaped words. The boy had been ill three days. His fever had climbed until the flesh behind his eyes boiled with it, his skin blanched yellow and blue. His father had stopped entering the room. A bowl of water sat untouched beside the bed, and no one called for the priest.

Then — just before the cock crowed, just as the wind stilled — the boy drew in a breath so sharp it cracked phlegm in his throat. His mother looked up. His eyes were open. The heat had left his body. She reached for him, but he rose before she could touch him — slowly, without effort, like a figure rising through water. His skin was pale and dry now, his mouth closed, expression unreadable. He looked at her as if she were a stranger. Then he stepped past her, barefoot, silent.

He walked out into the chill, barefoot on frost-bitten earth. The wind did not stir his hair. The dogs did not bark. The door of the house swung behind him but never latched. No lantern was lit, yet the path before him seemed sure. The boy did not stumble. His steps were slow, measured — not with caution, but with intention. His small frame made no sound. No steam rose from his breath.

At the village well he paused. His reflection did not appear. He leaned forward and stared into the water. A thin smile passed over his lips — brief, incomplete — not a child's smile, nor one meant for joy. His lips parted. He whispered. The sound was not heard, not even by the owl above him that stirred once and then froze. It was not a word, but something lower, wetter. The surface rippled gently, then stilled. The boy stood upright again, placed one foot on the rim of the well, and with a grace too practiced for a child, vanished down into the dark.

By morning, the well was found cracked. Not shattered — cracked deep, as though something had pressed outward from within and split the inner stones. The water had receded to nothing. A stink lingered over the lip — not rot, not waste, but something colder, metallic, and thin. The village women clutched their children tighter. Men muttered about digging another pit outside the tree line. No one asked where the boy had gone. His mother sat on her threshold with an empty bowl in her lap, her eyes red, but dry now. She did not speak all day. Nor ever again.

The village turned inward. Doors latched in daylight, shutters closed not against weather but against breath. No child was sent for water. Carts stood with axles rotting, hens pecked among the graves of pigs. The priest stopped ringing the bell for morning prayers — he no longer found the words. Men spoke low under porches, looking not at each other but at the

well, now covered with a sheet of splintered wood and stones stacked atop it, as if weight could keep something from crawling back out.

It was the tanner's widow who named him first. The stranger. The traveler with the tired face. She said she saw him near the well that night. Said she smelled sulfur after he passed, said the ground turned soft where he stepped, though it had not rained. Her words caught fire in dry air. They found others who had seen him — or claimed to. The innkeeper stammered, trying to recall his face. "Dark eyes," he said finally. "Not brown. Dark."

The stranger was found in the woods, asleep against a tree, arms folded like a man in prayer. He did not resist. Did not speak. His eyes opened once, and those who looked into them stepped back before they knew why. He was bound, and no rope left a mark. He was taken to the square, and no priest came to bless him. The old rope from the gallows shed was knotted in silence. A boy offered to hold the horse.

When they hanged him, his body kicked but made no sound. The sky remained clear. Crows watched but did not gather. He did not swing long. He was buried without a stone in the earth near the well.

Three days later, just before dusk, a figure walked from the forest with dust on his boots and a travel sack slung over one shoulder. His face was lean, worn, his hair matted with the long dust of road. His eyes were dark, not brown — dark. A farmer watched him pass and dropped his scythe in the field, backing away into the stalks without knowing why.

The man did not look left or right. He did not glance at the cracked chapel or the shuttered homes. He walked north. His shadow kept pace, though the sun had already fallen behind the ridge. As the village fell from view behind him, no one called out. The path wound between pale trees, then open fields, then the thick low roads of trade that ran toward Bruges.

He entered the city near midnight, his boots marked with wet from the marshland edge. The gate guards did not halt him. The wind carried his steps beyond the light of their torches. Somewhere in the city, a baby began to cry and would not stop until dawn. The devil, in the face of the hanged man, stepped into Bruges like a man coming home.

Plague

The city breathed through alleys and gutters, a thousand voices rising with smoke from braziers and the thick stink of river filth. Bruges swelled with traders, pilgrims, thieves, scribes, and wool merchants who came in caravans and left heavier than they arrived. Market stalls pressed shoulder to shoulder under canvas and rafter, barrels of salted fish stacked beside fine silks, inked parchments curling in the sun beside pigs' feet and dried

tongues. The streets groaned beneath boots, hooves, wheels, and dogs. Bells rang from towers and chapels, and the noise of life was constant — even in filth, even in hunger.

In the quarter by the tannery wall, a rat crept up onto a merchant's stall, drawn by the blood crusting the edge of a cleaver left too long in the open. It sniffed twice, blinked, then fell still. Its sides rose once. Then no more. The merchant didn't see it — he was haggling over goose fat with a woman who had no teeth. But the servant boy noticed. Thin, barefoot, no older than thirteen, he moved to brush the animal aside with a reed broom. When he did, the handle splintered and sliced the inside of his palm. He swore and wiped the blood on his tunic. An hour later, he was vomiting behind the cart, shivering in sun. His breath rattled as he stumbled back inside the shop. The merchant cursed him for laziness and told him to sweep the flies from the dried apples. The boy collapsed before the bell struck again.

At the end of the street, hunched in the shadow of a blackened wall, a man swept the cobblestones with a crooked broom made of bundled reeds. His robes were patched, his hands wrapped in dirty cloth, and his face hidden beneath the wide brim of a felt hat, too low for the season. The broom did not touch the ground often. His movements were slow, more ritual than work, as if stirring something hidden just beneath the stones. Flies buzzed past him in thick clouds, drawn by the meat carts and spilled milk, by the bruised peaches and broken eggs that rotted in the midday heat. They did not land on him. One brushed against his wrist, faltered mid-flight, and dropped lifeless to the cobble.

He paused. Coughed once — soft, deliberate, like clearing dust from a forgotten room. The sound was not loud, but those nearest turned slightly as if feeling a cold shift through cloth. The air changed. The smell of yeast and sweat, of burnt fat and river tar, faded for a moment. A new scent, faint and dry — like hot stones after rain — passed between stalls. Then it was gone. A wind followed. Nothing strong. Just enough to tilt the smoke from a nearby chimney. Just enough to scatter the flies in a new direction.

That evening, five more servants fell ill in the same quarter. A midwife found her hands shaking without reason and dropped her water pail. A monk collapsed while reading psalms aloud in the cloister and died before the candles could be lit. No pattern was found. No names shared. Only the look in their eyes, gone glassy as river ice, and the way they bled when none had touched them. The man with the broom had already moved on to another street. His shadow did not always follow his feet.

The bells of Saint John's tolled with no pattern, not for mass, not for mourning — only for motion, as if their sound could keep the death from settling. Within days, Bruges knew what it carried. Not a fever. Not a curse in the ordinary sense. Bodies swelled black beneath the arms and thighs, lips cracked and split, blood poured from mouths with no wound behind it. First the poor. Then merchants. Then wives who had not left their homes. The city writhed beneath invisible hands.

Doctors walked the streets in masks shaped like birds, stuffed with dried lavender, mint, rue. They waved censers thick with smoke, turning like dancers in panic, not ritual. Charms were nailed to doors — little bones, scraps of parchment inked with names, bits of hair tied with red thread. Children wore iron keys around their necks. Old women burned onion peels and hung their cloaks with dried wolf's tongue. Nothing changed. The blood came anyway. It trickled from the ear, the eye, the nose. A child fell mid-step into her father's arms and bled out before he reached the door. Her body was light, as if hollowed.

In the hospital by the river, the linen ran out by the second night. Floors were packed with the moaning and the still. Nurses no longer asked names. Hands shook as they fed broth, washed filth, lanced boils. Some began to mutter to themselves, not prayers — older things, half-remembered chants from grandmothers, things never said in daylight. A physician locked himself in a supply room and drank laudanum until he choked.

Unseen, the devil moved through the corridor like a thought. No footfall marked his passage. No breath stirred the oil lamps. He wore no face now, or if he did, it changed too quickly to hold. Sometimes a child passed and looked into a corner where no one stood, then screamed and did not stop. Sometimes a nurse would suddenly freeze mid-motion, one hand raised, eyes unfocused, before slowly resuming as if something had passed through her.

He passed the beds one by one, touching brows gently — like a mother checking for fever. Sometimes with a fingertip, sometimes with breath alone. The ones he touched stilled within moments. No struggle. No final sound. They simply ceased. One woman died with a hymn on her lips, still half-sung. Her mouth remained open until morning.

The devil paused by a man who prayed in whispers even as blood wept from his eyes. He did not touch him. He only watched. Then moved on. Behind him, the shadows in the corners of the ward lengthened. The smell of lavender and smoke could no longer mask the stench of opened flesh. Outside, the rats were no longer running. They had stopped, as if waiting.

The house stood on the eastern edge of the city, beyond the walls thick with soot, where the street lanterns burned longer and the ironwork on the gates bore family crests passed down through wars and famine. Inside, the scent of beeswax and dried flowers clung to the curtains. In one of the upper chambers, candles burned at every corner, and water steamed in bowls gone cold from waiting. The air was tight with breath and silence, broken only by the rhythm of pain as the young lady labored — her cries muffled by cloth, by modesty, by the dread that everyone pretended not to feel.

The midwife had arrived after dusk, walking in as if summoned, though no runner had been sent. She wore a cloak the color of dried blood and carried a satchel lined with clean linens and something wrapped in leather. No one asked her name. The servants stepped aside when she passed. Her voice, low and calm, held the tone of someone who had seen this many times. She spoke little. Her hands were pale, strong, and cold. The lady clutched them

during the final contractions, whispering for her mother. The midwife told her to hush, that it would pass soon.

But the child came wrong. Too quickly. Too quiet. A wet sound, followed by stillness. The midwife held the infant in her arms, lifting it gently. It did not cry. Its face was gray. Eyes half-lidded. She wrapped it in linen without looking toward the father, who stood frozen near the hearth, his knuckles white around the hilt of a knife he did not know he'd drawn.

The mother lay back, panting shallowly, eyes staring up at the rafters. A moment passed. Then blood began to pour, sudden and too much. A scream rose from the maid at her side. The midwife only watched, one hand resting on the infant's chest, as if feeling for a breath that would never come. No urgency moved her. No prayer passed her lips. When the bleeding stopped, the bed was soaked through. The woman's face had gone slack. Her mouth remained open, as if caught mid-word.

The father dropped the knife and fell to his knees. He did not weep at first. Only stared, hands shaking. When the tears came, they came in heaving silence. He turned at last, asked for the midwife. Called her. Then shouted. The room was empty. Only the maids remained, pale and motionless. One clutched a rosary. The other crossed herself so many times her fingers bled.

The front door stood open, and no footsteps marked the stone. The gatekeeper had seen no one leave. The servants, questioned in a fury, swore no one had summoned her. That no one had opened the door. The maids began to contradict themselves when asked to describe her — one said she was red-haired, another claimed her hair was black and bound. One remembered a mole on her chin. The other said her face had been veiled.

The child was buried without a name. The mother beside him, her grave marked with an inscription cut short in stone. For days, the nobleman wandered the upper rooms in silence, his hair gone white at the temples. He burned the linens, sealed the birthing room, and never spoke of that night again. But he kept a single question scratched into the inside of his desk drawer in his own hand: "Who opened the door?"

By week's end, Bruges cracked like dry wood under frost. The dead no longer waited for blessing. They lay where they fell — on thresholds, in alleys, in beds already stripped bare. Horses walked riderless through the streets, their reins dragging in the muck, hooves dark with ash. The bell towers had gone silent. Not for lack of will — the priests had fled. The ones who remained locked themselves in crypts and sacristies, muttering verses that broke halfway through, their voices rough from thirst. Some wrote letters to Rome that would never leave the city. Others simply wept.

Noble families bricked their gates and doors, ordered food lowered from upper windows, fired arrows at those who approached begging for bread or mercy. They dined in silence, unable to eat, while the sound of wailing rose from the streets like smoke. The plague was

no longer a sickness — it was a presence. Something that moved, chose, watched. Men began to mark their own doors before dawn, not to warn others, but in a gesture of surrender.

In the southern quarter, where taverns clung like barnacles to the backs of warehouses, one still stood open — or rather, broken. Its shutters hung loose, door split at the hinge, the sign above its entrance blackened by fire but not fully burned. Inside, six men slouched at a low table, heads bowed over untouched mugs, their skin blotched, their limbs slack with the final stages of fever. They did not speak. Only coughed, spat, groaned. One leaned back and laughed once — short, high-pitched, without source.

The door creaked though no hand touched it. A figure stepped through — slow, sure, not hurried. He wore the clothes of a traveler, boots clean where the mud outside had caked everyone else. No dust on his shoulders. No smell of sweat. His face was unremarkable, one you would forget the moment it passed. The men barely looked up. One of them tried to ask for water and choked instead. The stranger sat down beside them.

There was no order, no exchange. A mug was already overturned at the table's edge, red liquid pooled beneath it — not wine, not beer. Too thick. Too dark. He reached out, dipped two fingers in, then drew the cup upright and drank. His eyes closed as he swallowed. The air in the room drew inward. The coughing stopped.

One by one, the men fell silent. Their mouths opened, tongues slack. Their bodies slumped forward. But their lips still moved, as if whispering. No sound came. The stranger stood. He did not look back. His boots left no print in the soot. He stepped into the street, and as he passed the withered vines climbing the wall, they curled tighter against the stone.

Later that night, three of the tavern men were found still breathing. Their pulses weak, their eyes wide open, unblinking. When asked what had happened, none could speak. Their throats moved, but nothing passed their lips. No sound. No breath. No word. They wept without tears, lips trembling like men trying to remember a language they no longer owned. Their voices had not left them — they had been taken.

The drums came first — low, deliberate, slow as a heartbeat thick with mud. Then the chant followed, a tangle of voices rising and breaking, not in harmony but in desperation. A long line of bodies filled the street between Saint Catherine's gate and the fish market square, men stripped to the waist, flesh already raw and torn, backs shining with blood and oil beneath the cloud-thick sky. They moved in a rhythm older than memory, lashing themselves with cords knotted in bone and metal, each strike sounding like wet cloth against stone. Faces twisted in grief and fervor, mouths open as they sang not for mercy, but for punishment.

Women and children stood behind broken carts and stairwells, clutching one another in silence. No cheers followed this march, no prayers. There were no blessings from priests.

Only eyes, watching, some hollow, others wide. A woman crossed herself again and again until her wrist began to shake. Her son covered his ears.

The line curved through the city's heart, and at its center walked a man none of them had seen join — bare-chested like the rest, hair slick with sweat, a rosary hanging from his belt but not used. He walked with the others, step for step, lash for lash. The cord in his hand was black, its end weighted with three lead beads. When he struck, the sound was crisp and perfect — each time like a blade pulled from flesh. He smiled when he did it, but not with pride. With recognition.

No one noticed the lack of blood.

Where others dripped red into the streets, their backs streaked with tears and old scars, his skin remained pale, untouched. When the lash landed, it left no mark. When it coiled in his hand, it whispered faintly, a sound no one could name. One man turned to glance at him — a boy, barely old enough to walk among them — and stumbled, face twisting in fear. He whispered something, but the chant swallowed his words. He never looked again.

The devil walked among them as though born to it. His feet struck the stone without echo. The lashes fell in perfect rhythm, but his breath did not rise. Each time they cried out, he smiled wider. A merchant collapsed in the square as they passed. The devil stepped over him without pause.

The procession turned toward the bridge, a hundred bleeding men and one who did not bleed. The chanting reached its final verse, voices cracking, bodies faltering. The devil did not falter. His cord struck the same place on his back each time, perfect and false. When the march ended beneath the stone arch of the bell tower, the sky opened with rain. The others looked up, some with tears, some with relief.

The devil turned and walked away, his back dry.

Church of Stone

Avignon crouched behind its thick walls like a body already prepared for burial, its stone bastions wrapped in banners that hung limp in the windless heat. The Rhône ran sluggish beside it, its waters dulled with ash and silt, and the bridges that once bore pilgrims and traders now carried only monks and messengers with sealed letters and pale lips. This was the city of the papacy — Rome displaced by politics, schism, and fear — and yet even here, beneath the weight of holy law, the plague had found its way in. The bodies were hidden better. The prayers louder. But the stench, faint and unyielding, clung to the alleys behind the bishops' homes and slipped beneath the marble steps of the papal palace.

The pope had not left his chambers in days. He spoke in brief tones through a heavy curtain, and his words, though clear, carried the rasp of a man whose lungs had forgotten light. Cardinals met in whispered circles in the cloisters, some scribbling notes about signs in the stars, others debating whether angels had begun speaking through children. One claimed he saw Saint Michael descending in a shaft of fire. Another said the statue of the Virgin had bled from the eyes at vespers. Reports of demons walking the roads were dismissed, until a priest collapsed mid-sermon and screamed that his own thoughts were not his own.

Visions became common enough to be feared. Wine was no longer trusted at mass. Bread was broken but not eaten. One monk stared too long at a fresco and began weeping uncontrollably, saying the saints were changing shape in the paint. Another struck himself blind and insisted it was the only way to keep his soul unspoiled.

And amid all this, one more monk arrived.

He bore the tonsure and the robe, the sandals and sackcloth, the silence of discipline. He passed through the gates with the others who came seeking refuge, just another bowed figure in the company of prayer. His eyes were downcast, his hands folded beneath his sleeves. No guard stopped him. No name was asked. He entered the palace grounds as one of them, unseen because he belonged to what was expected — a holy man in a holy city, head bowed like all others.

But none saw that his breath did not fog in the morning air. That his robe bore no dust despite the road. That the bees in the herb garden grew still as he passed.

He walked through corridors lined with velvet and incense, beneath ceilings gilded with saints and martyrs, through shadows that seemed to pause in greeting. He spoke to no one. Yet the pages at the scriptorium glanced up as he passed, and two forgot what they were writing. A choir boy saw him near the chapel door and dropped the censer, fleeing without word.

The monk passed through the palace as if returning to a place he'd already known. His sandals made no sound. His presence left no scent. Yet the air behind him clung to the walls like breath that would not exhale.

The papal court echoed less than it once had. Once, its halls had roared with rhetoric, dispute, and the layered music of diplomatic tongues. Now, words dropped into silence like stones into still water. Courtiers walked with hunched shoulders and whispered prayers between clenched teeth. The air was never warm, no matter how many braziers they lit. Dust gathered on unused chairs. The wine soured too quickly in its casks.

In the heart of that stillness, where the holy decrees of Europe were shaped by trembling hands, the devil stood behind them — not commanding, not whispering, only present. He wore the shape of a monk still, though his face had begun to alter in small ways: eyes too

deep, lips too still, the skin at his temples too smooth to belong to any man. No one turned to see him, but all felt the pressure when he entered. Conversations trailed off. Fingers hesitated at the quill. The scribes, who once copied papal edicts with the speed and certainty of routine, now found their hands heavy, their minds uncertain. Letters curled where they should have struck straight. Names were misspelled. Sentences ran in circles or contradicted each other halfway through.

The devil never spoke. But he stood just close enough for their candlelight to stretch strangely around him. His shadow leaned farther than the wall allowed. Some said drafts were to blame — the windows had grown strange in their frames. Others claimed fatigue. But day by day, the bulls and briefs leaving the papal chambers grew darker. One declared a fast across all Christendom, then in the same breath demanded feasting to honor Saint Clement. Another called for mercy on the sick, then instructed the burning of those who coughed in public. One bull anathematized a bishop already dead, another named a town by the wrong name, then sent an army to collect its tithes.

No one questioned the words aloud. But as they sealed each document with wax, the cardinals glanced sideways at one another. The scribes drank more. The young priest assigned to transcribe canon law fainted on the third day and awoke whispering a name he could not remember. The devil stood behind them all. He did not guide their hands — he simply stayed near, and the ink seemed to thicken with his presence.

Behind the great desk in the apostolic chamber, the Holy Father signed his name with a shaking hand. No one saw the figure behind him. But when the candlelight bent sideways and the wax dripped backward up the taper, a page dropped his inkwell and fled the room. No one chased him. There were more decrees to write. More names to misspell. More contradictions to speak in the voice of the Church.

The pope had not spoken in full sentences for days. His meals, left untouched on silver trays, were carried out cold. The herbs once burned in his chamber for clarity now hung limp in the corners, their scent turned sour. At night, he wandered in half-sleep through verses he could no longer recall, and when he prayed, the syllables tangled in his mouth like knotted thread. His attendants kept their distance, save for one aged deacon who no longer blinked when the Holy Father muttered to himself. They said the weight of souls had bent him. They said it was the plague pressing against the mind. But in the still hours before dawn, he saw things no one else named.

That night, the dream returned, stronger than before. He stood before the altar of the palace chapel, though the floor beneath his feet was stone-blackened and hot. The altar itself was cracked — not visibly, but he could feel the fracture deep within it, as if it no longer rested on earth. Something throbbed beneath it. Fire, not red nor gold but a dull, living black, pulsed upward through the marble veins. Saints in the fresco above him twisted

their faces downward, and from their mouths came no prayers, only silence, open and gaping. The crucifix wept not blood, but smoke.

He reached forward — to bless, to command, to touch — but the heat licked up his arms like oil-soaked cloth. His skin began to bubble, to curl, but he did not wake. Even as he screamed, no sound reached his ears. Only the crackling beneath the altar grew louder, like breath being drawn from the bones of the world.

When he woke, it was still dark. The candles had burned low, their wax cold. His robe stuck to his arms. He turned them slowly, in disbelief — and there, across both palms and wrists, the blisters rose in round, angry knots. The flesh split in places, small but wet, as if he had grasped a pot pulled straight from flame. He cried out. The deacon rushed in and froze.

Neither spoke of it. The pope's hands were wrapped and hidden. But no one believed it was an accident.

Later that morning, as pale light bled through the stained glass above his chamber, a scratching came at the window. The attendants, thinking it a branch or bird, went to draw the curtain. But on the sill sat a raven, still and waiting, its head tilted unnaturally to one side. Between its beak it held something small and white — teeth, unmistakably human, clenched like a morsel in offering. It did not move when they shouted, nor flinch when they opened the shutter. Only when the pope himself approached did it spread its wings and leap skyward, vanishing into the thick Avignon air with a single cry that sounded far too much like a laugh.

That evening, the monk who had never been named did not appear at vespers. The deacon searched his cell, found nothing. Not a robe, not a sandal, not even the indent of a body that might have once slept there. But the door had not opened. The dust was undisturbed. And in the stone near the threshold, too faint to see unless the light struck just so, were two scorched footprints. The devil was gone. But the wind through the cloister halls whispered like breath behind the ear. Not far.

The palace grew quiet in the wrong places. Not solemn, but strangled — a hush that made the bells sound smaller, the prayers shorter, the steps of the monks heavier. The long halls, once thick with Latin and smoke, now stretched without voice, their silence interrupted only by the occasional clatter of something dropped or the distant groan of a door opening with no hand upon it. Whispers multiplied behind curtained thresholds, their tones tense, not theological — the sound of men who feared one another more than they feared the Devil.

It began when Bishop Raimond, grey-bearded and fever-eyed, accused his peer — Bishop Elie of Montpelier — of speaking in tongues not heard since Babel. No trial preceded the claim, no council convened. Raimond rose mid-meal, trembling, and declared before cardinals and scribes that Elie had held mass in the name of a prince "not of Heaven." Elie laughed, first out of disbelief, then fear, and begged for witnesses. But none came. The air

between them had thickened. When Raimond pointed a shaking hand, those gathered saw the skin beneath his nails had begun to peel away in strips.

That same night, Sister Aude — a woman known for quiet obedience, whose hands had copied three gospels by oil lamp — climbed to the edge of the well in the outer courtyard. She looked down not as if in despair, but in curiosity, as if hearing something rise up through the dark. The sacristan found her sandals neatly placed beside the rim, her rosary hanging from the moss-covered lip. He said he heard no splash.

And still the days went on. The palace persisted in its ceremonies, hollowed though they were. Incense burned. Psalms were recited. Bread was broken. But no warmth came from the rites. None, that is, until they touched the vessels.

The chalices began to warm in the hands of acolytes. Not hot, not at first — but with a slow, unsettling heat, like metal left too near the sun. The icons wept moisture from their painted eyes, and when kissed, they tasted of salt and copper. The altar stones, long cool even in the height of summer, now seemed to breathe. Priests drew back their fingers from the stone mid-prayer, unable to explain why it no longer felt sacred. A few crossed themselves twice, then stopped doing it at all.

No one saw him. But he moved among them — in the dark spaces between columns, in the thin shadow behind a choirboy's robe, in the reflection of a goblet that shimmered even without light. He touched the edge of a missal and its ink smudged. He laid his palm on a tabernacle and the host inside dried to ash. When he passed, candles fluttered without wind, and the scent of wine turned briefly to vinegar.

Only the animals seemed to know. The crows that nested on the palace spire had flown. The stray cat that had slept beneath the sacristy stone now hissed at the walls and would not enter. Something moved, touching holy things with invisible fingers — warming them not with grace but with a presence more ancient than any rite. And still no one spoke his name. They feared even to think it, as if thought alone might invite him to speak.

They held the exorcism in the lower chapel, beneath the great nave where sunlight could not reach. The chamber, carved centuries ago into the foundation, smelled of damp stone and old oil, its walls lined with candle stubs that flickered even when no wind moved. The girl was bound with linen strips, not rope — she had already snapped cords in the night, and two monks bore scratches across their faces from her nails. She was no more than fourteen, with thin wrists and dark circles under her eyes. But her mouth moved as if she'd lived long enough to hate in languages not taught in Avignon.

The priests gathered in threes. No one would stand alone. The lead exorcist, Father Berengar, was old but still sharp — he had performed three rites in his life, two successful, one silent. He clutched his breviary tight enough to leave sweat on the pages. As they

began, the girl sat still, eyes closed, humming a lullaby no one recognized. But when the first Latin command fell from Berengar's lips, she opened her mouth and laughed.

It was not one voice.

Four came through her throat, overlapping, clashing — a child's giggle, a man's whisper, an old woman muttering, and something else that had no breath in it at all. The walls trembled faintly. One candle guttered out. She turned her head slowly toward the crucifix and spoke in a voice that seemed to echo not in the chamber, but inside each man's chest.

"Will you cast out what built the altar?"

Berengar faltered. His voice cracked, the words of the rite slipping sideways. He tried to begin again, raising the crucifix, but his hand shook. The girl's eyes rolled back. Her spine arched. Blood trickled from her left ear. She laughed again, all four voices rising in a tangle of mockery and rage.

Then the priest staggered. Not from her scream, not from sound — but from pain. He clutched at his chest as if stabbed. His mouth fell open. He turned, gasping, eyes wide with confusion and fear, for no one was behind him. Yet a hand had him. A black hand, colder than bone, fingers curved around his heart, squeezing not to kill, but to pause him in place. He dropped the crucifix. It clattered against the stone and split in two.

The other priests rushed to him, too late. The girl's laughter stopped all at once, her head falling to the side. Smoke curled from her nostrils. A rat skittered from the shadow beneath the altar, its eyes wide, tail twitching. It paused mid-step and squealed once — then caught fire, silently, its body igniting without sound or fuel. It burned to ash in seconds. No one moved to touch the remains.

The girl collapsed backward. Her bindings slackened as if cut. Her chest rose and fell with slow, human breath. The rite was not finished, nor did anyone attempt to continue it. Father Berengar lay slumped, breathing in shallow gasps, the shape of a handprint bruising across his robe. No figure left the chapel. No door opened. But the air lifted. The candles steadied.

The devil had gone before the ashes cooled — not driven out, only finished. For now.

Myrmidons

The village of Saint-Benoît, far south where the land cracked from sun and the fields bore more dust than grain, had known famine long before plague. It crouched at the base of a hill shaped like a sleeping beast, with houses of pale stone and roofs patched in skins. Men muttered in corners there. Women counted lentils like coins. Graves outnumbered the

living. The well had gone sour in spring, and no rain came. Cattle bones lay white in the ravines, picked clean by wind and teeth.

One man, Etienne, thin and crooked at the shoulders, had watched his neighbors die one by one. He spoke less with each death, until he spoke only to his shovel. His wife had taken to sewing with no thread. Their child had not cried in two weeks. And one evening, with the sun sliding low and red across the horizon like a wound closing, Etienne left with the shovel and did not say where he was going. But everyone knew. The graveyard behind the chapel had been disturbed before — strange mounds, stones misplaced — and no priest remained to guard it.

He dug in silence, his hands blistered, his eyes dry. The grave he chose was fresh. A tanner's boy who had died twitching in his mother's arms just four nights prior. Etienne's breath came in hisses, his mind folded inward. When the spade struck the coffin, he paused, head tilted, listening. But no sound rose from beneath.

He opened the lid and found what he had hoped for: a mouth of crooked teeth, half of them gold. The child had been sickly but born to coin. The man took a knife and began prying.

By morning, he was found on the path behind the chapel, face upturned, lips blackened, his eyes gone — not cut or plucked, just... gone. Two hollow sockets, smooth and clean, no blood. The shovel lay beside him, blade cracked. The sack of teeth was missing.

Later that day, his wife came to the market with a scarf over her head and a basket at her hip. She spoke little, hands trembling. She traded six gold teeth — the weight of a grave — for a loaf of bread, two onions, and a thumb of salt. No one asked the source. They only glanced at her fingers and saw the dirt beneath her nails.

Watching from the mouth of an alley, hunched and wrapped in filthy linen, sat a beggar whose face no one remembered. His hands were gloved, though the day was hot, and a single red thread tied the brim of his cowl. He did not ask for coin. Did not speak. Only watched as the widow clutched the bread to her chest and disappeared down the lane.

That night, a shadow stood in her doorway long after the candles had gone out. It did not knock. It did not breathe. But the dogs would not come near the house, and the wind slipped past it like a thing afraid.

In the hamlets strung between the southern vineyards and the broken spines of the highland woods, the air grew thick with warnings. Milk soured before it reached the pail. Bread baked hollow. Crows followed carts for miles without cawing. In one village, a mother woke to find her daughter sitting bolt upright in bed, her mouth moving in silence. When she leaned close, she heard words — slow and clear — being spoken in perfect cadence, but backwards, like an incantation wound in reverse. The girl's eyes were wide open and glassy. When she was shaken, she wept but remembered nothing. By the end of the week, six more

children were found speaking in sleep, each in different houses, each repeating words none of the elders dared to write down.

The farmers took to salting their fields. Not to cleanse them — no saint was named — but to drive something out. Salt spread like frost in neat lines around doorframes, barn doors, chicken pens. Whole rows of wheat were turned white. Men swore they heard voices whispering from wells. A shepherd slit the throats of all three of his dogs when they began growling at nothing. One was found digging into the earth beside a tree, snapping at roots as if they bled.

And on the third day, under a sky pale and unmoving, the devil stood at a crossroads.

It was an unmarked place — four dirt paths intersecting between fields of dead rye and a grove where no birds sang. He wore the form of a traveler now, weather-stained, unremarkable, with a walking stick and a cloak heavy with dust. He leaned on the post at the center of the path and waited. Seven men came to him, one by one, from different directions. None knew the others. None spoke a greeting. One was a thief who had slit his brother's throat for a ring. Another was a mercenary with a crossbow and missing fingers. A third had been paid to drown a girl who would not confess.

They stood around him in a loose half-circle, and the wind died.

The devil did not speak aloud. He stepped close to each in turn, placed his hand lightly on their shoulders, and bent his lips near their mouths. The whisper was never heard, only felt — like warmth moving from lung to lung. The men did not flinch. Some trembled. One closed his eyes and wept. Another laughed and then bit his tongue bloody.

That night, each of the seven men, scattered across farms and inns and camps, dreamed the same dream. In it, a city burned, but no smoke rose. A great bell rang without sound, and children marched in lines into the sea, eyes open, arms raised. Above them all, on a throne of doors that could not open, sat a figure with seven faces — each wearing a version of their own. None of them woke rested. One hung himself before morning. The others rose and began walking — each toward a place he could not name, guided by a voice that came only when they did not listen.

In the field, the crossroads was empty. But the grass where the devil had stood had withered to ash, and no insects moved there.

By autumn, they were known by no name. Not by villagers who feared them, nor by merchants who refused them lodging, nor by priests who crossed themselves twice when they passed. They wore no sigils, no insignia — only black cloaks, thick and travel-worn, and hoods that stayed raised even in rainless heat. Seven in number, but never all seen together at once. Two might arrive at a town's edge and speak to the mayor in quiet tones before vanishing into the crowd. Another might be glimpsed days later leading a funeral procession

where no one had died. Children said they walked without leaving footprints, but left birds dead on the fences behind them.

No one saw them come or go. Yet in every village they touched, unrest followed like a shadow.

In one place, they whispered to the wives of bakers, telling them the flour had been blessed by the dead. The bread turned grey as ash and the people refused to eat — then starved in suspicion. In another, a man with blistered hands claimed one of them healed him with a word and a touch. He died the next morning, his mouth still forming that same word, over and over, even in death. In a port town, they sold a powder that cured thirst. It turned out to be lye and salt, and by week's end, the gutters ran with vomit and blood.

They preached in taverns, standing on tables without raising their voices. One told a story of a stone that could make men speak with angels if swallowed. Another said the Virgin had appeared to him in the skin of a fox. A third claimed that sin had reversed its course — that punishment now fell on the pure. He called it divine correction. Some laughed, but not all. And even those who mocked them found themselves later repeating what they'd heard, uncertain if it had been mockery after all.

Riots began without warning. A man slapped his neighbor over the price of eggs, and by dusk the smithy had burned and four homes with it. Mothers blamed their daughters for whispered blasphemies and locked them inside chapels overnight. One town hanged a child for drawing the devil's face in mud — though no one agreed on what the face looked like.

All the while, the seven moved on.

And the devil did not walk with them.

He stood at the edges, unseen, always just beyond the crowd. Sometimes watching from a doorway, sometimes seated among the beggars, sometimes a passing stranger with dust on his sleeves and quiet eyes. He did not command. Did not direct. But he observed with the stillness of one listening to music only he could hear. His hands folded. His mouth closed.

When one of the seven was caught — beaten half to death in a town square, accused of sorcery — he smiled through broken teeth and said only, "I dreamed of him. That's all." No plea. No defense. That night, the jail burned to the ground, and the man was gone. Not freed. Gone.

The brotherhood continued without pause. No banners. No call. Just presence — spreading like oil over stone. The devil watched. Not as a master, but as one curious to see what shape his shadow might take when cast into men.

The town of Bellême, tucked between low hills and fog-wet orchards, had been untouched for longer than most. The priest there still rang his bell for mass, and the baker still shaped

loaves with herbs for the sick. At the heart of it lived a healer — a woman named Lys, gray-haired and small, who spoke gently and mixed tinctures with a wooden spoon blackened by time. She had birthed half the village, set bones with linen soaked in wine, and pulled fevers out of children with boiled mint and ash bark. She asked nothing for her work. Not coin, only bread when there was bread, and a quiet word when there was not.

But words are thin walls against fire.

One evening, a woman collapsed in the road, clutching her stomach. Lys tended her. Three days later, the woman died, eyes yellow, lips black. No one blamed the sickness — only the hands that touched her last. Whispers moved quickly. Someone had seen Lys speaking to a man in black the week before. Someone else swore she had been heard singing in the orchard, though no birds had joined her. By nightfall, three men dragged her from her cottage. They tied her hands with wool cord, lit the pyre before dawn, and by sunrise, Bellême was quiet in a way that would never be forgotten. The scent of thyme clung to the square for a week.

Not far east, in the stone-walled city of Langres, a noble's daughter vanished. She had spoken the day before of a man she had seen in the garden, a man who smiled but left no shadow behind him. She'd told her tutor, who'd dismissed it. She'd told her brother, who had not. The boy searched the garden himself and found nothing — no prints, no gate left open — but the girl's shoes were left near the pond, their buckles undisturbed. Her dress was folded neatly beside them.

When the family searched, they found no trail, no sign of struggle. The girl's voice, faint and broken, was heard in the chapel the next morning — a hymn no one had taught her. The chapel doors were locked. Her voice did not return. She was never found.

By the time the town realized the seven had passed through, it was too late to speak of it. Three had been seen near the market, cloaks dark with dust, not speaking but standing still, watching as a child spilled honey and ants gathered faster than they should. One was seen outside the courthouse, hands clasped as two brothers struck each other with stones over inheritance not yet theirs. They moved on before dusk. That night, the north stables caught fire. Then the grain house. Then the bell tower.

No witnesses. No sparks. Just fire, crawling without smoke, licking at shutters before any flame was seen. The walls hissed as they cracked. The bells fell before they could ring.

In every town they passed through, people forgot their prayers halfway through them. Dogs barked at shadows that turned out to be their own. Infants cried when water touched their lips. And when the wind rose behind the seven black cloaks, the air turned still as breath held too long. The devil walked somewhere behind them, never near — but the ground still darkened where they had passed.

It happened in the hills beyond Arles, where dry stone paths twisted through vineyards left unpicked, and the only sounds were crows and the low hush of distant insects folding themselves into evening. The seven had made camp in the ruins of a crumbled abbey — roof gone, walls laced with ivy, its altar cracked straight through like a broken tooth. They lit no fire, spoke no words. They sat scattered among the fallen stones, still as statues, waiting for nothing but night.

It was the youngest of them who broke the silence — a man barely more than a boy, with hands too clean and eyes that never seemed to blink. He had not spoken since the night of the dream, not even when struck or questioned, not even when the others bled strangers for coin or prophecy. That dusk, he rose slowly, stood at the edge of the ruined cloister, and removed his gloves. His fingers trembled, not with fear but with some private knowledge. Then he drew a blade, small and rusted, from his boot. No one stopped him. No one asked.

He said only, “This is not mine,” and drew the blade across his cheek.

What followed was not frantic. He peeled the skin of his own face with a surgeon’s steadiness, not fast, not slow. Blood ran, but he did not scream. Only breathed, steady and deep, as if freeing something beneath. The face came away like wet parchment. He laid it, careful as a relic, upon a flat stone and knelt beside it once before collapsing. His body shuddered once. Then nothing.

The others did not speak. They stood. Then walked away into the trees, one by one.

At full dark, after the moon had risen high and cold, another figure arrived. He did not come by road or path, nor make sound upon the moss. The devil appeared beside the corpse as though he had always been there, crouched low, one knee pressed into the leaves. He said nothing. Only stared at the mask of flesh left cooling on the stone. Then he reached out and lifted it with both hands, cradling it like cloth soaked in memory.

He looked at the empty husk of the young man, then at the face. Slowly, without haste, he pressed it against his own — and it fit. Seamless. As if he had never worn another.

No wind stirred, but the ivy along the ruined wall curled inward, dry leaves rasping like teeth. An owl took flight in silence, its wings stiff and heavy.

By the time morning came, nothing remained. No body. No blade. Not even blood. Just a single black thread snagged on a branch near where he had knelt, fluttering without breeze. The ground where he had crouched had turned pale, as if the soil had forgotten how to nourish anything at all.

The Sleeping Ones

The village clung to the slope like a wound patched over with smoke and ice, buried high in the white veins of the Alps where winter never quite lifted, only loosened its grip for a few months at a time. The wind there spoke in long, slow sighs, and doors were kept barred even in daylight. In one such home — a cottage with low beams, its shutters nailed shut against the mountain's breath — a woman gave birth during the coldest night of the year. Her screams were muffled by wool stuffed beneath the doorframe, her prayers thin with exhaustion.

When morning came, the light that passed through the window was silvered and dull. The midwife had gone by then, her boots crusted with frost. The mother awoke alone, her husband still sleeping on the cot near the fire, and beside her lay the infant swaddled in thick linens, eyes closed, lips tinged the deep blue of cold. At first she thought the child had passed in the night, the silence too complete. But when she touched its cheek, it was warm. And when she leaned closer, the baby opened its eyes and smiled.

Not the reflexive, twitching smile of a newborn — but wide, slow, fixed. The corners of its mouth stretched too far, too symmetrical. No sound escaped it. Its breath was shallow, measured. The woman recoiled. Something in her spine told her not to touch it again.

She did not speak of this to her husband when he woke. She nursed the child with shaking hands. The infant did not blink the entire time.

That night, her husband stirred at a sound near the hearth — a creaking, deliberate, like wood settling beneath careful feet. He rose without lighting the lantern and stepped into the main room. The fire was nearly out, but enough coals remained to cast a faint orange glow. There, between the table and the far wall, stood the child. Upright. Its tiny arms hung loosely at its sides. Its head tilted slightly, lips still parted in that same impossible smile.

It made no sound. Only stood, swaying once, like a leaf not yet sure which way to fall.

The man did not move for a long time. When he finally spoke the child's name, soft and unsteady, the figure turned its head — slowly, smoothly — and looked up at him. He stumbled backward, knocking into a chair, but when the lantern was lit and the room flooded with flickering light, the child was gone. Not dead, not misplaced — simply not there. Only the linens it had been swaddled in lay in a heap near the hearth.

They searched the house. Then the paths. Then the snow. There were no footprints. Not a single dent in the white, not even from the child's first step. Yet the mother found something the next morning: seven dark lines etched into the inside of the windowpane, as if drawn with soot-covered fingers. They curved in a shape she did not know, but could not forget.

She never spoke again. The father sealed the door with nails and did not let the fire die. Above the valley, a crow was found frozen mid-flight, its wings outstretched, its eyes turned inward. Something had come down from the mountain — but had not come alone.

That winter, a sound moved across Europe — not carried by messengers or horses, but by breath, by dreams, by the slow unraveling of the silence people once trusted. It began in the far villages, then the market towns, and soon in the hearts of cities ringed with dying bells. Night by night, without plan or pattern, the sleeping began to scream.

It was not always a cry of pain. Sometimes it was joy twisted into wrongness — high-pitched laughter with no rhythm, no source. Children sat up in bed mid-dream and shrieked until their throats bled, clawing at the walls as if something waited behind them. Old men, who had survived wars and fires, woke sobbing like boys and refused to speak of what they'd seen. Wives struck their husbands in sleep. A nun near Lyon bit through her own tongue and could not explain why.

They all said the same thing: that they weren't alone.

Not in the way a person feels watched, nor the way a house creaks in winter. It was heavier than fear — a pressure, like something pressing down on the chest with fingers too long and too still. They woke gasping, lips cracked, skin ice-cold even beside the hearth. Their mouths tasted of ash and iron. Many awoke with bruises: round, dark impressions in sets of five, along ribs, throats, thighs. No intruder ever found. Doors locked from within. No prints in the snow.

In Paris, a physician recorded twenty-three patients in one district alone who could not sleep through the night without waking to laughter. They said it came from beneath their beds. When asked whose laughter it was, they could only say, "It knew me."

Merchants began sleeping with knives. Churches stayed open at night with candles always lit. In Vienna, a monk built a cage of iron around his cot, convinced it would keep the dreams out. He was found one morning curled into the corner, the bars bent outward, his eyes wide and dry. He hadn't blinked in hours. He was not mad. He just would not sleep again.

The devil was never seen.

But he was there — in the cold spot behind the shoulder, in the corner of the room where the firelight would not reach, in the moment just before waking when the breath catches and the heart skips. He left no mark except the memory of something having been too close. A whisper that said nothing, but never left.

In one village, they hung a man because his dreams were silent — the only one untouched. They said he must be sheltering the cause. He said nothing as the rope tightened, but he smiled in the way people fear from statues.

And the dreams went on.

By spring, the world had begun to speak in broken tongues.

In a chancery near Mainz, a scribe named Ulrich sat hunched over his desk long after the candles had burned low. His eyes were red, his fingers cramped, but he did not stop writing. The letters flowed without pause, curling across the parchment in tight, deliberate strokes. When the ink ran dry, he sharpened the quill and continued, scoring the skin of the page itself. The symbols were not Latin. Not Greek. They bent inward, coiling like roots, repeating in patterns that made the head ache to follow. When his apprentice asked what language it was, Ulrich blinked as if waking from sleep and said, truthfully, that he did not know. He could not read what he had written. Yet his hand returned to the page the moment the question ended. At dawn, he was found slumped over the desk, mouth open, eyes fixed on the ceiling. The parchment beside him was warm to the touch.

In a riverside town farther south, a woman long known for wandering the streets with her hair loose and her dress torn began to sing. At first, people gathered out of pity — she had once been a baker's wife, they said, until grief hollowed her. But when she opened her mouth, the sound that came was a psalm. Perfectly pitched. Perfectly measured. Only backward. Each verse reversed in word and cadence, flowing smoothly as if meant that way. Priests tried to stop her. She sang louder. They covered her mouth. The song continued through her throat, through her chest, vibrating in the air. By nightfall, the stones beneath her feet had cracked, and no one dared come near her again. She sang until her voice bled, and when it stopped, the silence rang like a bell struck too hard.

Even the animals were not spared. In a farmhouse near the coast, a dog began howling at dusk — not barking, not whining, but a sound so sustained and strained it pulled the neighbors from their beds. When the farmer reached the yard, lantern shaking in his grip, he saw the dog standing rigid, eyes wide and fixed on the dark between the trees. It whined once, low and broken, then raised a paw and clawed at its own face. The farmer screamed. The dog did not stop. By the time it fell, blind and shaking, the night had gone utterly still. No insects stirred. No wind moved the grass.

Above it all, unseen by those below, something watched.

In the rafters of a church whose bells had long since fallen silent, perched a figure small and slight, pale as bone dust. It took the shape of a child, naked and thin, knees drawn to its chest. Where eyes should have been, there was only smooth skin, unbroken, unmarked. Its head tilted as the sounds rose and fell across the land — the scratching of quills, the backward hymns, the animal cries that tore themselves apart. It did not react with pleasure or anger. Only attention.

From that height, it listened as the world unlearned itself.

Sleep had once been a refuge — the last haven untouched by fire, famine, or plague. But now, even the night betrayed them.

Across towns and cities, in high towers and hay-strewn huts, the dreams began to rot. Not with horror or blood, but with wrongness. A mother dreamt she had drowned her infant in a well, though her arms in waking life were always gentle. A miller saw himself nailing a priest to a barn door and wept with guilt though he'd never held a hammer. A boy cried in his sleep for stealing bread he'd never seen, begging forgiveness from someone not there. These weren't nightmares. They were confessions — perfect in detail, etched in memory, and always false. Yet when they woke, they felt real. The weight of sin clung to them like soot.

Some took to prayer. Others to silence. But it did not lift.

Children fared worst. They stopped sleeping altogether. They screamed when their heads touched the pillow, clawed at their blankets, shrieked at shadows behind shutters. One girl in Bruges tore open her own mattress with a candlestick, shouting that something was breathing beneath it. She had not spoken before that day in a year. A boy in Siena drove a nail through his own hand to keep himself awake. Another tried to drown himself in the wine basin to "wash the voices out."

The devil no longer needed to touch them.

He no longer whispered, no longer guided hands or shifted forms. He simply arrived — and sat. Sometimes beside the bed, legs crossed, still as cold iron. Sometimes perched above, chin resting in pale hands, watching. Other times beneath, the pressure of his body distorting the straw mattress from below, the shape of a shoulder or spine visible only when the candle dimmed. He never moved. But the air shifted around him. The walls began to sweat, not with heat but with a dampness like fever. The paint flaked. Crucifixes turned slightly, no matter how tightly nailed. Sometimes the plaster itself warped as if pressed from the inside by something unseen.

No doors were broken. No footsteps heard. But families awoke with their mouths tasting of rust and their pillows soaked in tears they didn't remember shedding. Even those who hadn't dreamt rose with aching bones, joints stiff, as if something had climbed inside them in the dark and rearranged what they were.

He never left signs. Only presence. And dread. And the understanding — wordless but absolute — that there was no place he could not sit.

The monastery of Saint-Hilaire stood apart from the roads, pressed into the hills like a thought too dangerous to finish. Its walls were thick, its windows narrow, its bells long cracked and mute. Snow lingered there even when the valleys thawed, and the monks had grown used to silence that lasted days. But one night, the silence broke.

Brother Matthieu woke screaming.

He tore from his cot and ran the length of the dormitory barefoot, his habit half-slipped from his shoulders, eyes wild and unblinking. He shouted of something that had no shape, no weight, no face — something that moved without moving. The others woke in confusion as he drove iron nails into the doors with a mallet taken from the carpentry shed, sealing them shut one by one. Wood split. Hinges screamed. He wept as he worked, sobbing apologies to men who begged him to stop, to let them out, to let air in. “It doesn’t come through doors,” he cried, driving another nail home until the head bent. “It sits where there is space.”

They tried to restrain him. He struck one monk across the mouth with the hammer, not in anger but in terror, then locked himself into the scriptorium, barring the door from within. By morning, the monastery was sealed tight — every entrance nailed, every shutter bolted. Smoke from the hearths filled the corridors with a sour haze, but no one dared open a window.

Inside the scriptorium, Brother Matthieu worked until his hands bled. He spread parchment across the table and drew with frantic urgency, charcoal snapping under pressure, fingers smearing lines before they could settle. He did not speak. His mouth moved soundlessly as he worked, breath coming in short, painful bursts. The face took shape slowly — not monstrous, not human. Too smooth. Too wrong in its symmetry. The eyes were placed where eyes belonged, but they did not look back. The mouth was neither smiling nor closed. It seemed unfinished, as if waiting for permission to exist.

When the brothers finally broke the door down, they found him slumped over the table, charcoal crushed into dust beneath his palm. His eyes were open, fixed on the drawing. His lips were parted, as if he had been about to speak but had lost the strength. One hand was still clenched around the nail he had meant to drive into the floor.

They tried to preserve the drawing. They carried it into the light, whispered prayers over it, debated whether it should be burned. But even as they argued, the lines began to fade. Not smearing, not burning — simply withdrawing. The charcoal lightened, then thinned, then vanished entirely, leaving only blank parchment warm to the touch.

By evening, Brother Matthieu was buried in the frozen ground beyond the wall. No one rang the bell. That night, none of the monks slept. And though every door remained sealed, though every prayer was spoken aloud, each man felt it — not moving, not touching — simply sitting somewhere nearby, content to wait where form was no longer required.

Vanishing

They scattered without signal. No horn, no bell, no vision sent in sleep. One day, the seven black-cloaked figures were seen crossing a wheat field, their shadows long against the rising sun. The next, only empty footprints remained in the dirt — scattered, overlapping, directionless, as if none of them had known where they were going, or whether they ever truly had.

The change was quiet, not announced. The plague began to shrink, not vanish. Fewer corpses on the carts. Fewer screams in the night. The groans from behind shuttered windows still came, but they lessened, became coughs instead of wails. Wells that had grown sour cleared themselves without hand or prayer. The water flowed clear, cold again. Rain came not in floods or ruin, but as steady, washing drizzle, enough to cleanse the streets without turning them to mud.

But the people did not cheer. They did not open their doors or light candles in thanks. Relief came without voice. Eyes remained lowered. No one asked aloud why things had changed. The wind still carried the memory of smoke. Dreams were softer, but empty. The silence had roots now.

In one village — nameless, burned to ash save for the stone chapel and a single barn — flames still curled through the ruins. The fire had been slow, creeping over days, never racing, always consuming in silence. The town's people had vanished before it finished, or perhaps during. No bodies were found. No names were spoken.

And through the center of that fire walked a man.

His robe was plain, gray with ash, his head bowed slightly as if in thought. He passed beneath falling timbers without flinching. His hands were empty. The smoke clung to him, but he left no soot behind on the ground. He moved not with triumph, not with sorrow, but with the calm gait of one whose work had simply reached its close.

No one saw him.

Though twenty hid on the hillside, watching the fire burn. Farmers, widows, children. None could explain the figure they later failed to describe. None remembered his face. Yet each of them felt, without agreement or proof, that he had been there. That something had passed through, not just the town but the world. Like a storm receding not into sky, but into the cracks beneath the earth.

He walked until he reached the edge of the flame. Then into it. Then past. And by the time the last ember fell, he was gone. No footprints. No name. Only a single nail left standing upright in the road, head blackened, body untouched.

The forest had not changed, though the years had turned. No roads had been carved through it. No ax had touched its heart. It remained as it was on the first day — dense, damp, forgotten. The moss still hung in thick green strands from the branches like the threads of old veils. Roots writhed beneath the soil, heavy and slow, and the trees stood close, their trunks black with age and moisture.

He came back as though he had never left.

But not as before.

No single form held him now. He was taller one moment, bent the next. His limbs shifted in shadow, stretched thin or swollen, never fully formed. Sometimes a man, then a hunched beast, then something without limbs at all — a crawling smear of black that passed over the fallen leaves without sound. His feet, when he had them, left no print. His breath, when visible, was colder than the air around it.

He moved through the trees, and they bent not away, but toward him — branches tilting slightly, not in recognition, but in a kind of weary welcome.

Birdsong, which had returned for a while, faltered as he passed. First one, then another, until the forest fell into its old hush — not a silence of peace, but of waiting. Insects stilled. The wind slowed, as if not to disturb his passage.

And then the pit.

He came upon it just as he had left it: unmarked, unmeasured, its mouth a dark wound in the forest floor. No vines had grown across it. No soil had caved in. It waited, as if knowing something would return.

He stood at the edge, and the shape he wore slipped again — a haze now, more smoke than flesh. No eyes, no hands. Just a thickening of the air, a shiver in the space above the earth. The birds above him clutched their perches, necks twisting silently, beaks parted as if to scream, but no sound came.

He did not look back. He had no head to turn.

For a moment, the forest held its breath.

Then, with no movement of limb or word, he began to descend. Not by step or slide. He simply sank, slowly, into the dark, as if the soil had opened its mouth once more to drink him down. Leaves drifted in his wake. The air closed behind him. Within seconds, the pit was empty again.

No trace remained. No echo.

And the silence deepened.

The descent made no sound. No rustle of root, no crumble of earth. He sank into the dark like breath held too long, the soil parting without resistance, folding around him not as barrier but as embrace. The trees did not creak. The moss did not stir. The pit sealed itself slowly, as if reluctant to let go of the moment, and then with finality, the earth was smooth again — unbroken, untouched. No mark, no scent, no trace.

Above, the fog began to roll in.

Not fast, not sudden, but with the certainty of something practiced. It came low through the trunks, curling around bark and stone, rising in the gullies, pooling thick beneath the branches. It did not scatter with the wind. The birds stayed mute in their nests. The ferns lay flat, damp with it. Even the crows that had once returned in cautious flocks now circled only from far off, veering sharply whenever the fog touched their wings.

In the valley beneath the woods, a village rested in the shadow of silence. No cries of livestock. No gossip near the well. The people, though spared the worst, still lived with doors latched and candles burned to the nub. But that night, one man — a carpenter named Jules, thin from a season without meat, grey-bearded, and hollow-eyed — woke to the sound of his wife humming. She lay beside him, still on her back, eyes closed, breath shallow.

The song was unfamiliar. The voice was not.

It was hers, and yet not hers — low and clipped, careful with vowels, as though testing a language newly learned. He rose slowly, called her name. She did not stir. But her lips moved, and the song faded into words. Not clear ones. Not human ones. They slid in and out of sense, soft as smoke, syllables grinding faintly at the edge of thought. A rasp, not from illness, but from depth — like something dry speaking through a throat made wet again.

When she opened her eyes, they were hers. But she looked at him as if he were the stranger in the room. And then she smiled.

Not wide. Not cruel. But slow, as though remembering a thing that had never happened to her, or perhaps had long ago.

He backed away, whispering her name, holding up his hand as if against flame. Her mouth moved again — and this time, no sound came at all. But still he heard it. Not in his ears. Somewhere behind them. In the bone. In the place that never forgets.

Outside, the fog pressed gently against the doorframe.

The birds in the rafters threw themselves against the roof and fell still.

There is no ending. Only signs.

A child in Lyon stares through a chapel window at a statue of the Virgin. He does not blink. His mother calls his name three times, her voice growing sharp with fear, but the boy does not turn. Hours later, he is found asleep beneath the pews, his mouth open in a smile too still to be called peace. He remembers nothing, except that the statue breathed.

In a cloister near Prague, a priest locks himself in the vestry and leaves the mass to be conducted without him. For months, his voice had been the last the sick heard before dying, steady and full of scripture. But now he speaks to no one. The candles in his chamber burn down to their stubs untouched. He is seen kneeling before the altar, not in prayer, but in silence — his hands folded as if waiting for an answer he has already heard.

In Venice, a city of canals and crumbling marble, a well at the center of the fish market goes dry overnight. The morning merchants find it hollow and cool, the stones inside worn smooth as teeth. No rain had fallen, no quake had shaken the earth, yet the water is gone. A woman lowers a torch down the shaft on a rope. When it reaches the bottom, it flickers once and then extinguishes without smoke.

And still the world continues. Trade resumes. Harvests are taken in. Churches remain open. But a dampness settles in the corners of cellars and beneath beds, a smell not strong enough to name but thick enough to notice. Some say it's the memory of plague. Others say it's something worse.

The devil's hand no longer stirs the pot. But the flavor remains.

In wooden beams that warp without heat. In salt that will not keep. In dogs that bark at stones. He is gone — or else waiting — as a bruise waits beneath the skin, needing only a press to bloom again.

The last page holds no ending. Only a wind that does not move the leaves. A silence thick as cloth. A breath held by something unseen.

And in the dark belly of a cellar, far from light, a rat coughs once — a dry, human sound — then scurries into shadow.

No one knows where it came from. No one speaks of it.

They simply go quiet. As if listening.